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Special Education Around the World

Lisa Battaglino

In 1992, when I first joined the faculty of Bridgewater State College, one of my goals was to begin an exploration of other countries' treatment of children with disabilities. My focus was not so much on compiling data, as it was in working with my foreign counterparts to better develop services for children with special needs. My assumption was that few places would meet the American standard of legal protection for children with disabilities; the guarantee of a free, appropriate, public education for each. In those countries I've studied over the past 15 years, my findings have revealed that although people dealing with the issues of special education may confront many of the same problems, each country has its own unique circumstances, policies, barriers, and resources with which to contend.

To best understand how foreign progress in special education compares with our own we must first take a brief look at the American history of special education. Prior to 1850 there was little attention paid to the education of children with disabilities. In a primarily agrarian society formal education was not seen as essential for the successful growth of any child, much less one with a disability, therefore there were virtually no programs, legal guidelines, or schools for the disabled in the United States. In fact, more than half of the children we now consider disabled, primarily those with learning disabilities and other mild limitations, would never have been considered disabled before 1960.

Only serious disabilities such as blindness, deafness, mental retardation, and other intensively limiting conditions were the focus of disability research. The early 19th century work of noted European physicians studying children with disabilities indicated that even children with relatively severe disabling conditions could learn through systematic instruction. The work of Philippe Pinel (1793), Jean Marc Gaspard Itard (1800), and Edouard Seguin (1842), prompted others in the United States to explore the possibilities of educating the disabled. When Sequin emigrated to America in 1848 he brought with him his philosophy, ideas, and excitement for the future in the field.

Early efforts for the education of the disabled, however, went terribly amiss when institutions designed for the systematic education of the mentally retarded became instantly overcrowded, unmanageable, and fraught with flaws. Harsh warehousing of human beings was the result. From 1848–1888, twelve institutions opened in the United States, and immediately became filled past capacity, understaffed, and incapable of properly servicing clients, let alone educating them. There was little improvement in conditions for the disabled for the next 100 years. In fact, the building of institutions proliferated until the 1960s, and the inhumane, lifelong institutionalizing of the disabled steadily increased until that time. Although compulsory education became legal in 1918, the exclusion of children with disabilities persisted. Children who were mentally retarded, deaf, blind, autistic, behaviorally disordered, seriously learning disabled, or in fact possessed any other type of disability could

Dr. Battaglino seen reading to a group of elementary school students, Belize, 2007.

be, and often were, told that their local school had no program to meet their needs, no teacher trained to deal with their disability, and no obligation to educate them. Sadly, when parents were brave enough to contest such school policies, they would find that the courts upheld the schools' decision.

The 1954 landmark desegregation case, Brown v. Topeka, was the result of seven sets of parents banning together to create change in the delivery of education for their children. This prompted parents of the disabled to form advocacy groups to actively seek out programs and legislation to protect their children. As a result, in 1975 the first federal legislation was enacted which guaranteed that every child with a disability be given a free and appropriate public education. This law, originally called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Since 1975 parents, teachers, and administrators in the United States have worked tirelessly to provide individual education programs to each child with a disability. Training teachers, developing programs, finding the money to finance programs, educating parents, and preparing students for post graduation opportunities, are some of the many issues which have confronted the field since 1975.

It is too presumptive, perhaps ethnocentric, to believe that we have much to teach the rest of the world in regards to special education, and little to gain from foreign experience. Yet, I must admit this was my mindset when I began my work with teachers in Moscow. The partnership I developed between School 1411 in Moscow and Bridgewater State College began in Millis, MA. The Millis School System had hired a native Russian teacher to create and teach in an innovative language immersion program. Along with several other BSC professors, a few BSC graduate students, and local teachers and administrators, a collaboration was formed with the Millis Schools to "bring special education to Moscow". What we found in Moscow in 1995 was that teachers, administrators, and the ministry of education were all eager to broaden their horizons to meet the needs of children with special needs. However, the economy, infrastructure of the school system, and long established attitudes about the disabled presented unique obstacles to overcome.

Our collaboration began with a trip to Moscow where we met with the Minister of Education, teachers, and school administrators to determine the best plan of action for a future synergy. We quickly learned that while there were classes for the "disabled" in some schools, these were focused on children with mild learning disabilities. And although we were told there was a school for the blind and deaf, we were not given access to any of these schools. We were also surprised to read in the local newspaper that someone had recently purchased and brought a wheelchair to Moscow. This hardly seemed newsworthy until we began to notice the number of people with severed or poorly formed limbs loitering in the subways on 18" x 18" boards made of wood or cardboard, begging.

In a visit of 10 days and at least 30 subway rides, in a city the size of New York, we never saw another disabled person. This was not a coincidence. Our hosts explained to us that there were three daunting forces that created their absence. In the first case, many people were ashamed of family members with disabilities, in the second, there were virtually no services, employment, or programs for the disabled, and thirdly, the cost of raising a child with a disability was prohibitive in a world where the cost of living and unemployment was at an all time high, and gross income at an all time low.

Under such circumstances, a rather hopeless situation occurred in which many parents did the best they could to provide for a disabled child at home, while many others gave children up for adoption, at birth or in early childhood. Parents who gave up children may have considered that at least in an orphanage there would be built-in care for these children. In fact, upon visiting one orphanage in Moscow, I did observe that children with Down Syndrome were integrated with other children and provided the same basic care, including rudimentary education programs. It became clear that for widespread change to occur in

Schoolgirl, ready for class, Moscow, 1997.

Moscow it would be essential to begin, as we had in the United States, by empowering those with a vested interest in the disabled—parents. A series of teleconferences ensued between parents from Moscow and their counterparts in America. Professionals in both countries were surprised to learn that the professionals in the United States did not have all of the answers. Parents on both sides complained that although, lip-service was paid to their demands, programs were often lacking, negative attitudes prevailed, and the emotional and financial costs of raising a child with a disability were formidable. The Moscow-BSC Special Education Collaborative continues to function with a focus on bringing educators together to observe and collaborate on philosophy, programming and service delivery.

In 2000, I was offered a position teaching an Introduction to Special Education course in Turkey. I saw this as an opportunity to expand the BSC collaborative efforts with Moscow, and to learn more about the Middle East and its work with the disabled. I learned that teachers throughout Turkey were being prepared in huge numbers to teach disabled children, as a result of a recent legal development in which their government had enacted a law similar to the American IDEA. Under this law each child with a disability would be guaranteed a free public education. The school I worked with, in Istanbul, was a private facility for wealthy children. It could be compared to Milton Academy, in Milton, MA. There were a few children with minor disabilities in the school, and these children were provided with the most progressive techniques teachers could acquire. The school, however, was hardly representative of a typical public school in Turkey. Although no teachers I encountered had visited American schools, or were familiar with any aspect of special education, their attitude toward special education was positive. Legislation addressing and ensuring education for children with disabilities was evidence of emerging acceptance and proactive efforts on behalf of disabled children.

After five, freezing cold visits to Russia and a lovely summer in Istanbul, I decided that I would add to my knowledge of special education abroad, but in a warmer climate. My grandmother had grown up in Cuba, and in 2001 travel bans had been lifted for teachers, so it seemed Cuba was a likely country to explore. Oddly enough, in many ways visiting Cuba was reminiscent of Russia. The communist influence in buildings and in a history of authoritarian leadership was similar. While the US had cut itself off from Cuba, Russia had obviously remained closely allied. But where teachers and administrators in Moscow were often frustrated, and stifled by low pay and lack of special education progress, teachers in Cuba, similarly to those in Istanbul, appeared hopeful and optimistic. Ironically, the condition of the schools visited in Havana had far fewer resources than those in Moscow, including a lack of paper, pencils, and books, but school authorities boasted of full inclusion, well adapted schools for the physically disabled, blind, deaf and mentally retarded, and of 100% literacy.

Recess time for Cuban students, Cuba, 2002.

It may be that the positive rhetoric in Havana was due to a fear of speaking against a government-run school system, and that some of the griping in Moscow was due to professionals in a "freer" Russia feeling able to voice dissatisfaction, but nonetheless, in Cuba there seemed to be a knowledge of, and acceptance of, children with all disabilities, and a positive emphasis on educating and including these children. As in Moscow, spokespersons from the Ministry of Education in Cuba had traveled to the United States and were knowledgeable about current practices in special education. But contrary to those in Moscow, the Cubans seemed to agree with the majority of American practices, while the Russians sought out more analysis of methods and proof of successes. As in the past, travel to Cuba has become more difficult for American educators, so that correspondence has become limited to government-screened emails and letters.

In 2005, a trip to Aruba offered an opportunity to look at the education of children with special needs, and I expected conditions there to be similar to those in Cuba. Again, I was under a prejudiced assumption that Aruba

was a poor island where education was lacking the level of American funding and know-how. Although the weather was similar, and school buildings without windows were common, that is where the similarities with Cuba ended. Where people struggle to make ends meet in Russia, Turkey, and Cuba, those in Aruba experience less than 1% unemployment and they enjoy a thriving economy based on tourism. They are an educated people with a philosophical and financial commitment to meeting the educational needs of all Aruban children and it is notably evident.

Aruban authorities were the only administrators I have ever dealt with who freely offered access to any school I would like to see. They asked what type of school and what type of disability was of interest to me. I chose to visit a school for children with behavior disorders, as I regard this to be one of the most difficult types of programs to develop successfully. At the Imeldahof School, I found the teachers, mostly trained in Holland, progressive and professional. The school was well staffed and the resources were good. In addition, to government funding, additional funding for "extras" was available through donations from the community. By all American standards, this school was operating at a high level using the most current technology and philosophies to provide for the educational needs of its students. Some techniques were truly cutting edge, and I was happy to bring back to my students and colleagues modern methods of play therapy such as Wegabao Guia, a six-week game module, and Snoezelen, a multisensory environment believed to improve communications and understanding of self. In Aruba, a well educated populace, and plenty of money, sets special education perhaps even above American standards in some areas. Albeit, a small population of approximately 70,000 fairly well-off Aruban residents makes for a more manageable situation than the more than 300 million in America, over 31 million in Turkey, over 224 million in Russia, and over 7 million in Cuba.

In the spring of 2005 I visited another small sunny country, Belize, with a population of approximately 297,000. Like Aruba, where independence from the Netherlands was established in 1986, Belize (formerly British Honduras) became an independent country in 1981. As in Aruba, they have begun to develop their tourist industry, but in terms of economic development Belize struggles. Unlike any of the other countries I visited, the schools in Belize are not run directly through the government, but by the mostly Protestant churches. In addition, mandatory education is not enforced and as in Russia and Cuba, special education is not legally required. However, in the school I visited, children with mild special needs were included in all classrooms and teachers and administrators were eager to obtain information on methods and materials for meeting the needs of children with disabilities. Teachers were familiar with American special education terminology such as "inclusion" and "environmental deprivation" and freely discussed the strengths and weaknesses of their schools. Although classrooms were overcrowded, resources were slim, and conditions were poor, the teachers and administrators in Belize were positive, proactive, and skilled at working with children with mild disabilities in inclusion settings.

Everywhere in the world legislators, school administrators, teachers, and parents deal with the many issues involved in educating the disabled. Teachers have raised the same issues in every country I have visited over the last 15 years. They have observed the increase of children with special needs in their classes, they are concerned about the pros and cons of including all children in the same educational setting, and they are seeking out the best ways to work with parents. Schools often have unique problems, as in Moscow, where it is still acceptable to exclude a child from education, or in Belize where a teacher cannot meet the needs of a child with mild mental retardation in a class of 40 students with regular education needs. I have learned, however, that parents, teachers, and school administrators throughout the world are dedicated to providing the best possible learning environments for children, and in that regard the United States is no better, no worse, but on a parallel plane.

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